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The World on a Whorl: Considerations on Aztec Spindle Whorl Iconography

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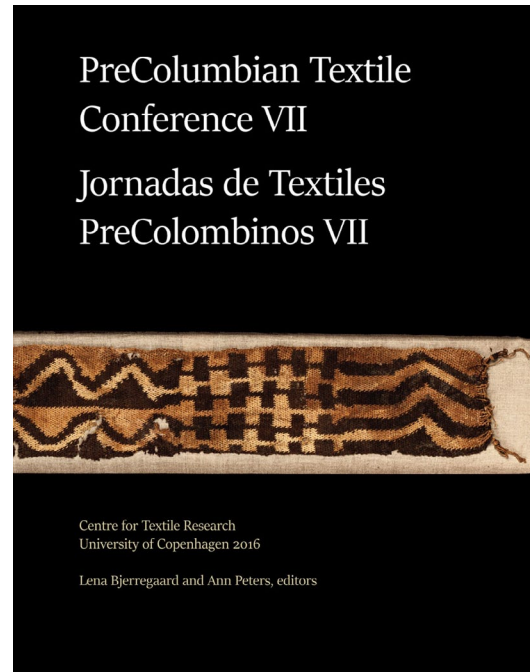
Jesper Nielsen

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The World on a Whorl: Considerations on Aztec Spindle Whorl Iconography

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Abstract

An unpublished collection of Aztec (Late Postclassic central Mexico, ca. 1400-1520) spindle whorls (totaling 33 items) with rich iconographic embellishment is the focus of this paper, which will discuss a set of recurring iconographic themes, such as the 'sun disk', 'eagles', 'jade disks or chalchihuites' and 'cloud-scrolls', on the whorls. Previous treatments of spindle whorl imagery have tended to regard such motifs merely as decoration, but here I suggest that the repertoire at hand indicate a limited scope of motifs that share some cosmological and religious significance. In a broader perspective these observations point to the potential mythological underpinnings of activities such as spinning and weaving – which on the surface and from a modern, Western standpoint may seem rather mundane.

Keywords: Aztec, Late Postclassic, Mexico, spindle whorls, iconography, sun, cosmology

El mundo en un malacate: Algunas consideraciones sobre la iconografía de los malacates aztecas

Resumen

En este artículo se analiza a fondo la ornamentación iconográfica de una colección inédita de 33 malacates aztecas (Postclásico tardío, centro de México, ca. 1400-1520). Aquí se discutirá una serie de temas iconográficos que a menudo aparecen en los malacates, tales como el 'disco solar', 'águilas', 'discos de jade' o 'chalchihuites', así como las 'volutas en forma de nube'. En estudios previos, los motivos representados en los malacates se habían considerado solamente como mera decoración, sin embargo, en este estudio se sugiere que el conjunto de malacates bajo escrutinio contiene un conjunto de motivos bien delimitado, cuyo significado es tanto cosmológico como religioso. Desde una perspectiva más amplia, estas observaciones denotan los fundamentos mitológicos potenciales de las actividades del hilado y del tejido, las cuales –a primera vista y desde una perspectiva occidental moderna– podrían parecer relativamente mundanas.

Palabras claves: Azteca, Posclásico tardío, México, malacates, iconografía, el sol, cosmología

"In Aztec assemblages there is no category of artifact that is as significant for male identity as spindle whorls are for female identity" (Brumfiel 2001: 75)

In this brief article I discuss a category of artefacts related to the production process of textiles, namely spindle whorls. I present the preliminary results of my research on an unpublished collection of Aztec spindle whorls, or, more correctly, the Early to Late Postclassic period of highland central Mexico (A.D. 1400-1520), totalling 32 items. Several of these are

embellished with iconographic motifs of high quality, and it is some of the recurring iconographic themes that will be the focus of this contribution, among them, the 'sun disk', 'raptorial birds', 'jade disks or *chalchihuites*' and 'cloud-scrolls'. Previous discussions of spindle whorls have generally tended to neglect such motifs, perhaps regarding them merely as decoration (see, however Brumfiel 2007, 2008), but here I suggest that the repertoire at hand indicate a limited scope of motifs that share cosmological and religious significance. Furthermore, these observations point to the mythological underpinnings of daily activities such



Fig. 1. The private collection of central Mexican archaeological objects, mainly Aztec spindle whorls, Classic period figurine heads from Teotihuacan, and a few pieces of obsidian from New Zealand (photo: Jesper Nielsen).

as spinning and weaving which on the surface, and from a modern, Western standpoint, may at first glance seem rather mundane.

Little is known about the exact provenience of the whorls which came into my possession in 2011. I received them as a gift from Professor emerita in History of Religions Tove Tybjerg, who had in turn received them from another colleague (Merethe Sundby-Sørensen) some 20 years earlier. Apparently they had first been presented to Arild Hvidtfeldt (1915-1999), one of the founders of the Department of American Indian Languages and Cultures at the University of Copenhagen (see Nielsen & Fritz Hansen 2008: 35-37), by an unknown Dane who had spent time in central Mexico. The whorls came in a long, shallow box for Christmas decoration, nested in old, cotton wool (Fig. 1). A few Teotihuacan figurine heads and pieces of obsidian were present as well. A hand-written note explains that the obsidian pieces derive not from Mexico, but from New Zealand. The figurine heads have holes drilled into them, presumably because a previous owner had them put on a string along with the whorls. Remnants of gipsum or a kind of glue or their back of the whorls also suggest, that for a time they were mounted on a board. In spite of the rather rough treatment, and in spite of the fact that we can not say precisely where the whorls come from as any contextual data is missing, there can be little doubt that they derive from 15th-16th century central Mexican highlands, and more specifically, in all likelihood the Valley of Mexico. The distinct Aztec iconography and the quality of the imagery leave little doubt about this.

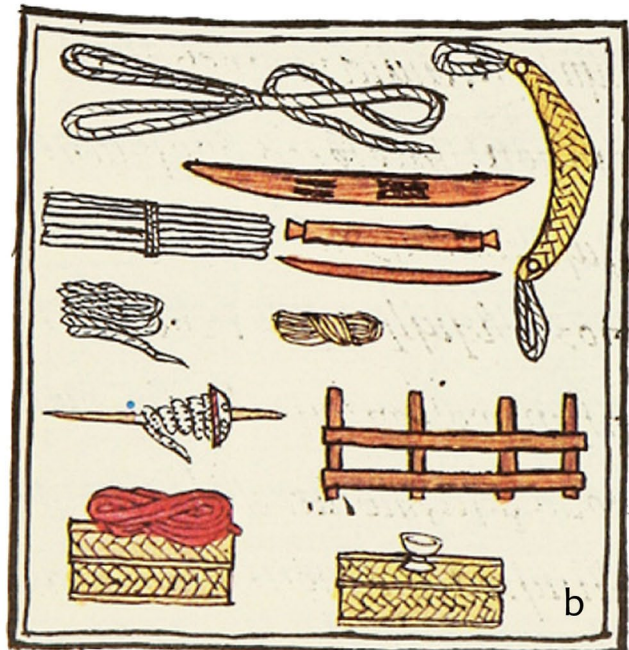


Fig. 2. a) Aztec woman spinning cotton (*Codex Mendoza*, fol. 68r) and b) Illustration from Bernardino de Sahagún's *Códice Florentino* (Book 8, fol. 31v) depicting various tools used in spinning and weaving, including *malacatl* 'spindle and whorl'.

Spinning and Weaving in Aztec Culture

Even though we are fortunate enough to have examples of Aztec textiles preserved (see Filloy, this volume; López Luján, this volume), the archaeological evidence of textile production not only from the Postclassic Aztec, but from pre-Columbian Mesoamerica in general, is best documented by the ceramic spindle whorls and ceramic spinning bowls that, in contrast to the textiles themselves, the weave and other implements, have survived the centuries since the conquest. It is well-known that spinning, weaving and textile production played an enormous socio-economic role in Late Postclassic central Mexico, and several researchers have discussed this in detail drawing extensively on early Colonial sources (e.g., Smith and Hirth 1988; McCafferty and McCafferty 1991; Brumfiel 2001: 66-67), stressing women's role in maintaining a constant production and exchange of cotton and textiles. Significantly, textiles were of central importance in the tribute system, in particular finely woven capes or *mantas* (see Berdan and Anawalt 1992), and as noted by Frances Berdan: "Textiles predominated in the tribute lists, being paid in great quantities" (Berdan 1996: 124-125). Similarly, early Colonial sources like the *Codex Mendoza* (Fig. 2a) relate how closely the act of spinning and weaving was associated with women, showing how, at their naming-ceremony, infant girls were presented with weaving implements including a spinning whorl, a spinning bowl and the batten (Brumfiel 2008). In his magnificent *Historia General de Nueva España* (known as the *Florentine Codex*) the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún quoted an Aztec advice directed towards the young women: "[a]pply thyself well to the really womanly task, the spindle whorl, the weaving stick" (Dibble and Anderson 1969: 96) (Fig. 2b). Spinning and weaving continued to be a prime female activity after the conquest, including among the nobility. Thus, a painting the *Anales de Tepeaca* (c. 1645) shows Nahua women (Fig. 3), standing next to their husbands, who are dressed European-style, busy with their spindles and whorls (Horcasitas and Bittmann Simons 1974: Fig. XXVIII).

The Nawatl term for the spindle and the whorl was *mala-catl*, a word composed of the verb *malina* 'to twist' and the noun *acatl* 'cane or reed' (Smith and Hirth 1988: 349; see also Molina 2008 [1571]: 51v). It is interesting to note that the act of twisting and turning of an object by hand to produce something valuable, be it cotton or fire, is also characteristic of the drilling of a New Fire, a highly ritualized event celebrated every 52 years, securing the birth of new sun and a new world era (e.g., Anderson & Dibble 1953; Smith & Elson 2001). As we shall see, several spindle whorls have sun imagery on them, perhaps relating the two activities and cosmological responsibility divided between the sexes. In



Fig. 3. Nahua couples as represented in *Anales de Tepeaca* (c. 1645, fol. 22r) with women clad in native *huipiles* and skirts busy spinning cotton, their men dressed in fashionable European clothes (after Horcasitas and Bittmann Simons 1974).

the realm of the gods and supernatural beings, the goddess Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina ('Lady Cotton') was often shown with spindles, whorls and unspun cotton adorning her hair or incorporated into her headdress (Figs. 4a-b), and Thelma Sullivan described her as "the model noblewoman, the Great Spinner and Weaver of the Fabric of Life" (Sullivan 1982: 14). Sullivan also discussed the sexual symbolism of spinning and weaving, an aspect shared with another goddess, Xochiquetzal ('Flower-Feather'), who was associated with love and lust, but at the same time served as the patroness of weavers. These latter observations show quite clearly that spinning and weaving was regarded and represented as an activity permeated by religious meanings.

Aztec Spindle Whorls and Their Iconography

Spindle whorls is a relatively common artefact in Aztec archaeological excavations (Brumfiel 2001), and can be grouped into two categories: large ones for spinning agave fiber and smaller ones (typically measuring between 23-31

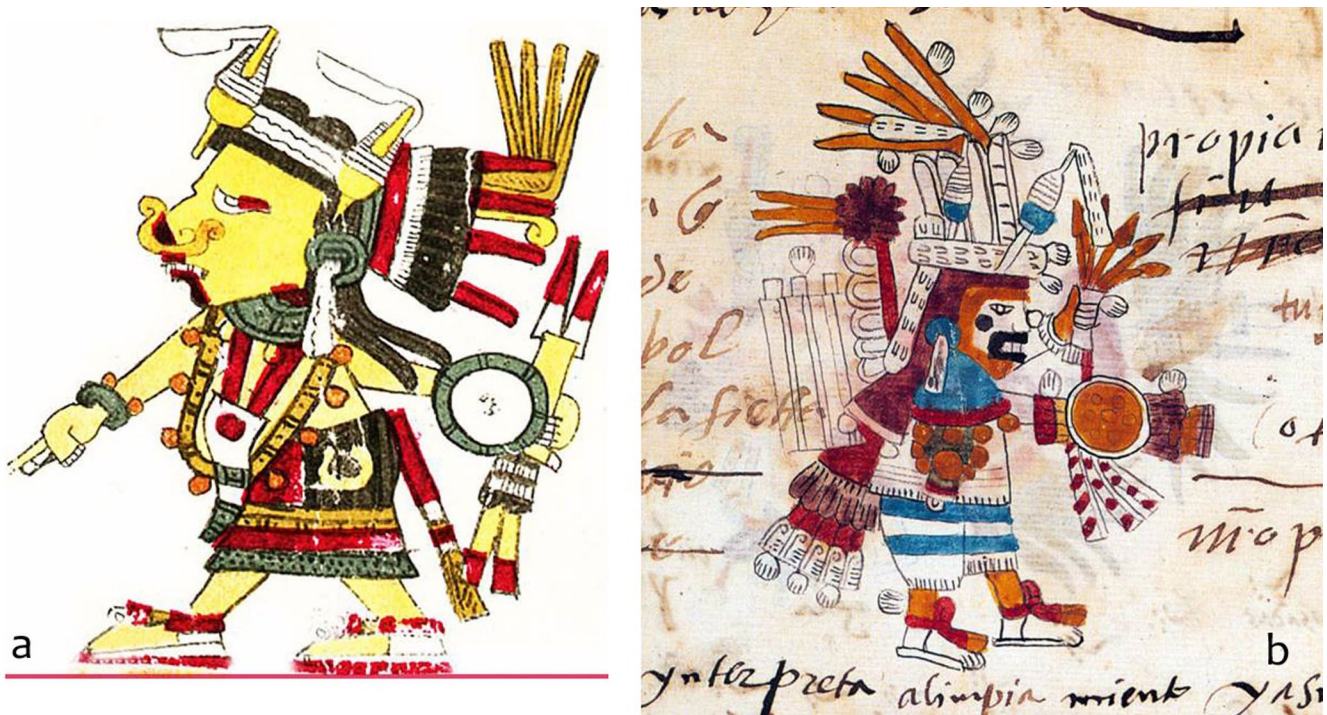


Fig. 4. The female deity Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina with spindles, whorls and cotton in her headdress. a) *Codex Borgia*, p. 55 and b) *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, fol. 3r.

mm in diameter) for spinning cotton (Parsons 1972; Smith 2016: 41). The execution and elaboration of the whorls vary considerably; some are plain while others have molded decorations. The diameter of the whorls in the Copenhagen collection range from a minimum of 25 mm to a maximum of 35 mm, and with an average diameter of 29,5 mm, indicate a fine, tightly spun cotton thread and hence a higher-quality cloth as the final product (Brumfiel 2001: 70). With their very elaborate iconographic motifs, they are most probably elite objects. As observed by Elizabeth Brumfiel (2001: 71):

"The decorative attributes of spindle whorls may indicate the attachment of women to their identities as cloth producers. In many regions of the world, the decorated artifacts serve as sources of gender identity and gender claims to power [...] Sharisse and Geoffrey McCafferty suggest that spindle whorl in Postclassic Central Mexico bore elaborately painted, molded, or incised decorations because they were an important means of communicating female identity and power".

Brumfiel notes that in the sample of 96 whorls from her excavations at the Aztec site of Xaltocan (in the northern end of the Valley of Mexico), in more than half of the cases, the surface of the whorl is: "divided into four or eight parts which might refer to cardinal and intercardinal directions" (Brumfiel 2008: 37) suggesting a cosmological symbolism, as well as an association with the movement of the sun. Other motifs from Xaltocan include flowers, vultures, frogs,

a crocodile (the so-called *cipactli*-monster) and a feathered serpent. Brumfiel grouped the majority of the motifs into four thematic clusters which are related to: 1) solar energy, 2) spatial and temporal ordering of the cosmos, 3) the creation of that order and 4) cyclical movement (Brumfiel 2008: 37). Based on this she goes on to suggest that the Aztec concept of *tonalli*, referring to 'heat or a creative energy', was intimately linked with the spinning process, and cites examples that suggests that this also count for other kinds of craft production. Brumfiel further notes: "Huichol women offer sacrifices to the sun in order to acquire the force that allows them to produce high-quality textile" (Brumfiel 2008: 40). The semantic overlap between the sun's diurnal cycle and the act of spinning may thus be approached and understood through phenomena and concepts like: Warmth, movement, energy and creation.

Iconographic Motifs in the Copenhagen Collection

The whorls with clearly identifiable motifs in the Copenhagen collection (Fig. 5) can be placed in three main groups. The first of these are the sun disks, which Brumfiel also discussed (Brumfiel 2008, 2007), and two of the whorls are embellished with the rays of the sun, confirming the presence of this striking motif on whorls (Fig. 6a-b).

The second group show birds, three eagles (Fig. 7a-c), two of which were quite possibly made from the same



Fig. 5. A selection of the whorls in the Copenhagen collection (photo: Christophe Helmke).

mold, and what appears to be a hummingbird (Fig. 7d). The numbers "2" and "1" can be discerned with the eagles, and could well refer to dates in the ritual 260-day calendar, the *tonalpohualli* (Boone 2007: 15-17) (Fig. 8a-b). The 15th day in the sequence of twenty days signs is thus named *quauhtli* 'eagle'. Common to both eagles and hummingbirds are their relation to the sun: the eagle as one of the mythological creatures intimately linked to the creation of the sun as well as its continued existence, e.g., by way of the eagle warriors and the *cuauhxicalli* ('eagle-ves-sel') associated with human heart sacrifices and eagle warriors (see Taube 2009); and the hummingbird as a reference to the nectar-sucking birds into which dead warriors were transformed when joining the Sun God in his heavenly realm (e.g., Nielsen 2017).



Fig. 6. The two whorls with the sun disk motif (photo: Christophe Helmke).



Fig. 7. Whorls with eagles (a-c) and hummingbird (d)(photo: Christophe Helmke).



Fig. 8. Whorl with eagle and the numeral '1' on the right side of the raptor's head (photo: Christophe Helmke, drawing: Jesper Nielsen).

One of the whorls, although badly worn, display the heads of a crocodilian-like creature known as *cipactli* which corresponds to the first day in the 260-day calendar, and as such it is as related to the beginning of time, cycles and ordered life. Finally, a group of whorls are decorated with cloud- and wave-like scrolls, and others with concentric circles known as *chalchihuites*, that is, the jade disks which in Aztec iconography connote preciousness and abundance (Fig. 9). Together, these motifs may symbolize either the misty, watery and heavenly or, primordial, female environment that, along with the male Sun, made the first creation possible, or they may, in a more general



Fig. 9. Whorls with cloud-like motifs and *chalchihuites* (photo: Christophe Helmke).

ways refer to fertility, abundance, productivity and success in creative labours.

There is a significant correspondance between the motifs in the Copenhagen collection and those described and analyzed by Brumfiel. Yet, if we are to achieve a better understanding of the significance and distribution of the whorl motifs, a larger, encompassing corpus will have to be assembled. A first and important step in such an endeavour will have to be to have additional whorls from excavations and museum collections published or accessible online.

The World on a Whorl: Conclusions

What may come as a surprise, is that some of the recurring motifs on these apparently somewhat humble domestic artefacts are in fact identical to the iconographic themes on the most impressive state-level monumental pieces of art known from Tenochtitlan, the capital city of the Mexica. Thus, eagles and eagle-warriors are frequently represented in reliefs or in sculptures, and the sun disk reappears in spectacular ways on the famous Calendar Stone and the Tizoc Stone (e.g., Townsend 1979: 43-70; Villela and Miller 2010) (Fig. 10a-b).

However, the similarities between these enormous public sculptures and the diminutive spinning whorls go beyond the sun imagery they display. The impressive circular stones, often with a hole or depression in their center, were in all likelihood used in human sacrifices, which were performed partly to secure the continuous maintenance of the cosmos and the sun's cycle. As Cecelia Klein observed: "When the Aztecs wished to sacrifice a captive during their equinoctial

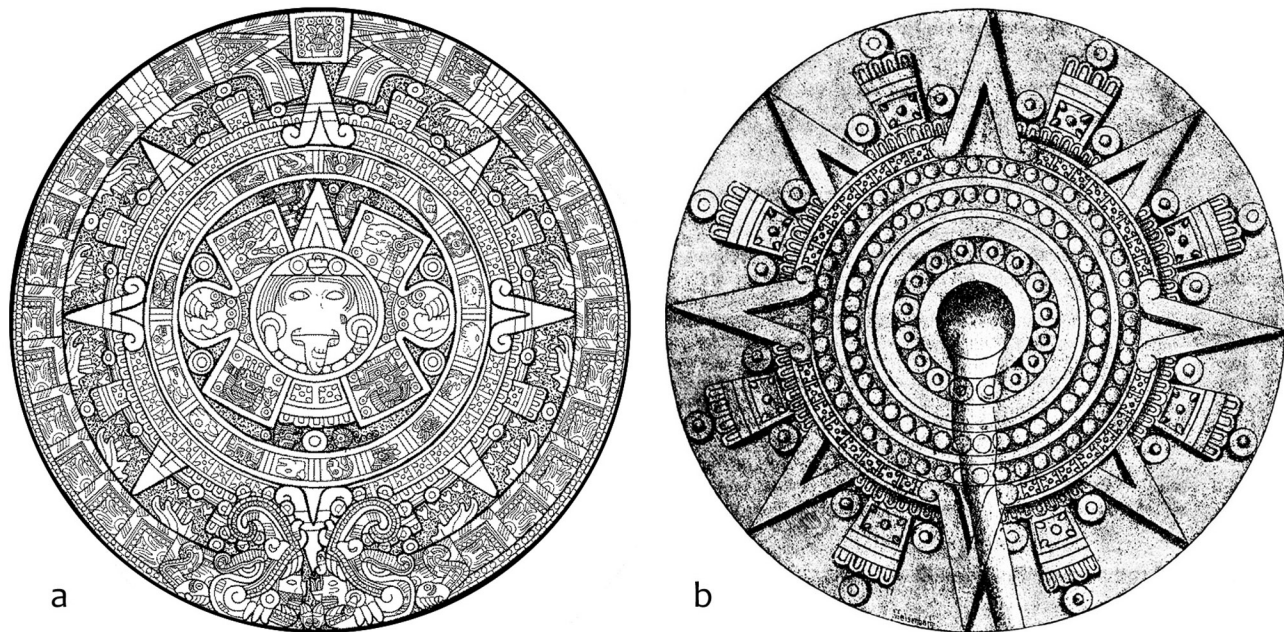


Fig. 10. Monumental sun disks, known as *temalacatl*: a) the Calendar Stone and b) the Tizoc Stone (adapted from Villela and Miller 2010: 239; MacCurdy 1910).

month Tlacaxipehualiztli, they tied him to a rope emanating from a flat, round stone called *temalacatl*, or "stone spindle" (Klein 1982: 17). An image from the *Codex Magliabechiano* (fol. 30r) shows a fully armed jaguar-warrior approaching a captive tied to the *temalacatl*, and interestingly the sacrificial victim is covered in cotton balls and his sword, or *macuahuitl* has no obsidian blades like that of his opponent – but only cotton (Nuttall 1983 [1903]: 18) (Fig. 11). Clearly, there seems to be a semantic overlap or metaphorical relationship between the act of spinning and sacrificing. In other words, the sacrificial sun-stones can be interpreted and compared to a giant spindle whorl, being instrumental in the efforts of securing heat, movement and energy to the cosmos.

When viewed in this perspective, Aztec women's daily, continuous occupation with spinning and weaving was not separate from the male warrior's cosmological responsibilities in terms of maintaining the surrounding society. Indeed, they shared some of the same fundamental concepts and expressions and dealt with similar concerns (Brumfiel 2008: 40), thus linking, or complementing, the act of spinning and weaving (alongside the metaphoric battle of pregnancy and childbirth) with the obligations of the men and their primary role as warriors (see also discussion in Clendinnen 1991: 153-173). Spinning, in a very literal sense, was also about making the world go around: Women spun and wove the cosmos, thereby continuously recreated the



Fig.11. Aztec jaguar-warrior and sacrificial victim tied to a *temalacatl* (*Codex Magliabechiano*, (fol. 30r).

world (Klein 1982; Sullivan 1982: 30), just as blood and heart sacrifices did.

We see this succinctly expressed by the artist who painted and wrote the *Codex Cospi*, where on page 25 we see Xochiquetzal (Fig. 12), the luscious patroness of weavers, and although she is seated according to the normal conventions, she is portrayed in a warrior's position, holding a shield in the arm, and the other raised as if to hurl off a dart with an atlatl – but – replacing the weapons are her weaving implements.



Fig. 12. Xochiquetzal shown as spinner, weaver and female warrior (Codex Cospi, p. 25).

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